

Sermon Series: "Called to Be"
Sermon #1 - "We are called to be..."
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I had the honor this past weekend at co-officiating the wedding of a former youth group member of mine named Will. Will's dad was my teaching pastor when I was in seminary and Will and his sister Betsy were in my youth group. Now, I know what you're thinking: "But you don't look old enough to have a former youth group member getting married!" Thank you for that, that's very sweet of you, but it's true. So last Sunday evening, in blistering sun of Cave Creek, AZ, I stood next to my mentor and colleague David Shirey as we performed the wedding ceremony for Will Shirey and Kassie Vaughn.

Part of what made the weekend so special for me was the chance to hear the stories that go along with such a blessed event. I learned about how Will and Kassie met for the first time at another wedding. I got to know their families and hear their recollections of the bride and groom. I heard the story of Coolwater Christian Church, where David pastors, a former new church start that still meets in a school cafeteria. I heard the stories of church members like Marilyn, who lives on a horse ranch and Ginny, a mentally disabled lady who helps set up for worship each Sunday. Every person I met had a story.

In addition, new stories were created last weekend, like at the Saturday BBQ, when Will's groomsmen stripped down to their Speedos and threw Will in the pool. Unfortunately, there ARE pictures to prove it happened. Then there's the story of family and friends gathered from 14 different states to celebrate this occasion. And the story about David looking at his son Will, who just yesterday was a little guy running around the church causing trouble, and saying, "I now pronounce you man and wife." Our lives are filled with such wonderful, sad, joyous stories.

We are people with stories and as Christians, we are called to place our particular story in the grand telling of The Story. Each of our stories, each of our lives is a thread in the tapestry of God's narrative. And as we weave them together, as we take our individual stories and combine them with each other, we live out who we are called to be, the followers of Jesus Christ, whom Hebrews calls the "author" of our faith, the Writer of our stories.

But we are more than our stories, aren't we? We are more than our individual tales. Our world wants us to think that the individual is the pinnacle of existence, that we should seek first, not the kingdom of God, but to embellish our personal plotlines. But the Bible tells a different story. The Bible tells a tale of God creating Adam and saying, "It's not good for you to be alone," and then creating a companion for Adam. And from that point forward, the Bible tells the story of God's people coming together and trying (albeit it very imperfectly) to be the community God has called them to be.

Ever since Adam and Eve, we've been trying to be God's community. In fact, that's why churches have things like mission statements. A mission statement helps keep our purpose front and center. It's like a magnifying glass, focusing us in on who we are called to be and what we are called to do. Our denomination has one: "To be and share the good news of Jesus Christ, witnessing, loving and serving from our doorsteps 'to the ends of the earth'." Our region has a mission statement: "Growing Disciples congregations for healthy, vital ministry." And as I'm sure you know, this church has a mission statement, crafted several years ago by the Long Range Planning Committee: "We are called to welcome people into a loving and caring church family,

equip people with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life and share God's love for us through compassionate service to others. We are called to be Community. Christian. Church."

Now I know what you may be thinking. "Blah blah blah. Mission statement, Schmission statement. Those things are just a bunch of words." And you'd be right. Because the power of a mission statement is not found in its words, but in the organization's passion to live it out. For a church specifically, the power of a mission statement comes from hearing it as the place where our story connects with God's story, the place where we partner with God to make God's kingdom real here on earth. Mission is finding out what God is doing in the world and doing it with God.

Of course, we won't do that perfectly, but that doesn't stop us from trying. And I believe our mission statement accounts for that fact by simultaneously addressing the past and the future. "We are called...to be." At some point in the past, we were called. Individually, we were called to acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We were called to be submerged in the baptismal waters or to stand in front of a congregation and say, "Yes, I believe." As a church, we were called to come together as a community to worship God and live out our faith. We each have different skills, different passions, different stories, but one thing we share in common: We have been called. As Jesus says in our scripture today, "Ask the Lord to send workers out into his harvest field." When we answered the call, we said, "Here we are, Lord."

"We have been called to be..." To be what? That's the fun part of faith, isn't it? To spend our lives figuring out exactly who God has called us to be. Personally, I'm still learning and being surprised by the things to which God has called me to do, and even more surprised by the person whom God has called me to be. I've learned that a calling is less about what you do and more about who you are. You could say that our mission in life is to continually discover who God is calling us to be.

But if we choose, we don't have to look to the future. We can be content in the present or, even more dangerously, stay rooted in the past. I don't care who God is calling me to be; I'm pretty comfortable right here. I was watching an old show recently about the Holy Trinity: Moe, Larry and Curly. Larry runs up to Moe and says frantically, "Moe! Moe! I can't see!" And Moe, says, "What's wrong?" And Larry responds, "I got my eyes closed." Sometimes life would be a lot less complicated if we could just keep our eyes closed. Who needs a mission statement then?

But Christians are people who look forward into the future and find out that God is out there ahead of them. It is our life-long mission to follow where God is leading. If we ignore our calling, our mission has been compromised. If we only look for God in the past, our mission has been compromised. If we refuse to look out ahead of us, to see God beckoning us forward into the future, our mission has been compromised. "We are called to be."

When the Long Range Planning Committee put together CCC's mission statement, they came up with three statements about who God is calling us to be, and I'll be looking at each statement more closely in the coming weeks. But they did something else, something bold and audacious and downright crazy: They had the courage to paint a picture of who they believed God was calling us to be. "We are called to be Community. Christian. Church." Now, you may think, "Where did they come up with such a creative, inventive line? I never would have thought to put those three words together!" But I believe there's a lot of wisdom packed into that sentence, and this congregation could spend the rest of its life trying figure out what that actually means. As I reflect back on our eight years together, I believe we're off to a good start.

We are called to be community, to embody what it means to be in relationship with each other. We are not simply a gathering of like-minded persons. Our belief in Jesus Christ

transcends our individualism. We are not you and you and you and you. We are “us” and that has implications for how we live out our faith and our lives.

There was a couple a few years ago who visited CCC regularly for several months, were consistent in their attendance and active in the church. Then one day the husband called me and said, “We want to let you know we’ve not coming to CCC anymore.” Part of the reason had to do with differing theologies (obviously he wasn’t a fan of the Three Stooges), but another part was eye-opening. He said that in their several months of attendance, not one person had asked them out to lunch or over for dinner. While the church was welcoming and hospitable, he said the sense of community ended there. There was no connection at the soul level. So one of the questions CCC can continue to ask is, “Are we building an authentic, biblical community here?” To do so takes a lot of time, and sometimes we don’t have a lot of time to give. But we are called to be community.

We are also called to be Christian. Seems like a no-brainer, right? “I’m here, aren’t I? How much more Christian can I get than this?” But sitting in church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than sitting in a forest makes you a tree. Living out the call to be Christian means letting the words of scripture and the teachings of Christ soak into us, taking root and bearing fruit. It means living our lives as if we were Christians first and everything else second. It means letting every decision we make and every statement we utter be pleasing in God’s sight. Think we can do that perfectly? And yet, that’s who we are called to be.

Finally, we are called to be the church. That means we are called to stand in the gap for those who can’t stand for themselves. We are called to be the beacon of hope in a hopeless world. We are called to be the ones who speak a word of truth in the face of lies and deception. As the church, we are called to connection with other believers and congregations locally and globally, to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world as they seek to combat the evil forces of oppression, hunger and poverty around them. Are we doing that? Are we only focused on taking care of ourselves or are we being the church in this world?

As your pastor these last eight years, I have tried to help us fulfill this mission. I haven’t done it perfectly, and sometimes I haven’t done it very well, but I sure have enjoyed writing this chapter of CCC’s story with you. I pray that when this story is told in the future, it will tell of a group of faithful people who learned how to come together in a more loving and caring ways so that they could be equipped to go out share God’s love. I believe we have worked together to continue becoming who God has called us to be, and for that I am forever humbled and thankful. We are called to be Community. Christian. Church. Thanks be to God.